Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Martin Luther King, Jr., original name **Michael King, Jr.**, (born January 15, 1929, Atlanta, Georgia, U.S. —died April 4, 1968, Memphis, Tennessee), Baptist minister and social activist who led the civil rights movement in the United States from the mid-1950s until his death by assassination in 1968. His leadership was fundamental to that movement's success in ending the legal segregation of African Americans in the South and other parts of the United States. King rose to national prominence as head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which promoted nonviolent tactics, such as the massive March on Washington (1963), to achieve civil rights. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

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Early years

King came from a comfortable middle-class family steeped in the tradition of the Southern Black ministry: both his father and maternal grandfather were Baptist preachers. His parents were college-educated, and King's father had succeeded his father-in-law as pastor of the prestigious Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. The family lived on Auburn Avenue, otherwise known as "Sweet Auburn," the bustling "Black Wall Street," home to some of the country's largest and most prosperous Black businesses and Black churches in the years before the civil rights movement. Young Martin received a solid education and grew up in a loving extended family.

This secure upbringing, however, did not prevent King from experiencing the prejudices then common in the South. He never forgot the time when, at about age six, one of his white playmates announced that his parents would no longer allow him to play with King, because

the children were now attending segregated schools. Dearest to King in these early years was his maternal grandmother, whose death in 1941 left him shaken and unstable. Upset because he had learned of her fatal heart attack while attending a parade without his parents' permission, the 12-year-old King attempted suicide by jumping from a second-story window.

In 1944, at age 15, King entered Morehouse College in Atlanta under a special wartime program intended to boost enrollment by admitting promising high-school students like King. Before beginning college, however, King spent the summer on a tobacco farm in Connecticut; it was his first extended stay away from home and his first substantial experience of race relations outside the segregated South. He was shocked by how peacefully the races mixed in the North. "Negroes and whites go [to] the same church," he noted in a letter to his parents. "I never [thought] that a person of my race could eat anywhere." This summer experience in the North only deepened King's growing hatred of racial segregation.

At Morehouse, King favoured studies in medicine and law, but these were eclipsed in his senior year by a decision to enter the ministry, as his father had urged. King's mentor at Morehouse was the college president, Benjamin Mays, a social gospel activist whose rich oratory and progressive ideas had left an indelible imprint on King's father. Committed to fighting racial inequality, Mays accused the African American community of complacency in the face of oppression, and he prodded the Black church into social action by criticizing its emphasis on the hereafter instead of the here and now; it was a call to service that was not lost on the teenage King. He graduated from Morehouse in 1948.

King spent the next three years at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, where he became acquainted with Mohandas Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence as well as with the thought of contemporary Protestant theologians. He earned a bachelor of divinity degree in 1951. Renowned for his oratorical skills, King was elected president of Crozer's student body, which was composed almost exclusively of white students. As a professor at Crozer wrote in a letter of recommendation for King, "The fact that with our student body largely Southern in constitution a colored man should be elected to and be popular [in] such a position is in itself no mean recommendation." From Crozer, King went to Boston University, where, in seeking a firm foundation for his own theological and ethical inclinations, he studied man's relationship to God and received a doctorate (1955) for a dissertation titled "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman."

The Montgomery bus boycott

While in Boston, King met Coretta Scott, a native Alabamian who was studying at the New England Conservatory of Music. They were married in 1953 and had four children. King had been pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, slightly more than a year when the city's small group of civil rights advocates decided to contest racial segregation on that city's public bus system following the incident on December 1, 1955, in which Rosa Parks, an African American woman, had refused to surrender her bus seat to a white passenger and as a consequence was arrested for violating the city's segregation law. Activists formed the Montgomery Improvement Association to boycott the transit system and chose King as their leader. He had the advantage of being a young, well-trained man who was too new in town to have made enemies; he was generally respected, and it was thought that his family connections and professional standing would enable him to find another pastorate should the boycott fail.

In his first speech to the group as its president, King declared:

> We have no alternative but to protest. For many years we have shown an amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice.

These words introduced to the country a fresh voice, a skillful rhetoric, an inspiring personality, and in time a dynamic new doctrine of civil struggle. Although King's home was dynamited and his family's safety threatened, he continued to lead the boycott until, one year and a few weeks later, the city's buses were desegregated.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Recognizing the need for a mass movement to capitalize on the successful Montgomery action, King set about organizing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which gave him a base of operation throughout the South, as well as a national platform from which to speak. King lectured in all parts of the country and discussed race-related issues with religious and civil rights leaders at home and abroad. In February 1959 he and his party were warmly received by India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and others; as the result of a brief discussion with followers of Gandhi about the Gandhian concepts of peaceful noncompliance (satyagraha), King became increasingly convinced that nonviolent resistance

was the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom. King also looked to Africa for inspiration. “The liberation struggle in Africa has been the greatest single international influence on American Negro students,” he wrote. “Frequently I hear them say that if their African brothers can break the bonds of colonialism, surely the American Negro can break Jim Crow.”

In 1960 King and his family moved to his native city of Atlanta, where he became co-pastor with his father of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. At this post he devoted most of his time to the SCLC and the civil rights movement, declaring that the “psychological moment has come when a concentrated drive against injustice can bring great, tangible gains.” His thesis was soon tested as he agreed to support the sit-in demonstrations undertaken by local Black college students. In late October he was arrested with 33 young people protesting segregation at the lunch counter in an Atlanta department store. Charges were dropped, but King was sentenced to Reidsville State Prison Farm on the pretext that he had violated his probation on a minor traffic offense committed several months earlier. The case assumed national proportions, with widespread concern over his safety, outrage at Georgia’s flouting of legal forms, and the failure of Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower to intervene. King was released only upon the intercession of Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy—an action so widely publicized that it was felt to have contributed substantially to Kennedy’s slender election victory eight days later.

Martin Luther King, Jr., and Lyndon Johnson

In the years from 1960 to 1965, King’s influence reached its zenith. Handsome, eloquent, and doggedly determined, King quickly caught the attention of the news media, particularly of the producers of that budding medium of social change—television. He understood the power of television to nationalize and internationalize the struggle for civil rights, and his well-publicized tactics of active nonviolence (sit-ins, protest marches) aroused the devoted allegiance of many African Americans and liberal whites in all parts of the country, as well as support from the administrations of Presidents Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. But there were also notable failures, as in Albany, Georgia (1961–62), when King and his colleagues failed to achieve their desegregation goals for public parks and other facilities.

The letter from the Birmingham jail

In Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963, King's campaign to end segregation at lunch counters and in hiring practices drew nationwide attention when police turned dogs and fire hoses on the demonstrators. King was jailed along with large numbers of his supporters, including hundreds of schoolchildren. His supporters did not, however, include all the Black clergy of Birmingham, and he was strongly opposed by some of the white clergy who had issued a statement urging African Americans not to support the demonstrations. From the Birmingham jail, King wrote a letter of great eloquence in which he spelled out his philosophy of nonviolence:

Martin Luther King, Jr., delivering "I Have a Dream"

> You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

March on Washington

Near the end of the Birmingham campaign, in an effort to draw together the multiple forces for peaceful change and to dramatize to the country and to the world the importance of solving the U.S. racial problem, King joined other civil rights leaders in organizing the historic March on Washington. On August 28, 1963, an interracial assembly of more than 200,000 gathered peaceably in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial to demand equal justice for all citizens under the law. Here the crowds were uplifted by the emotional strength and prophetic quality of King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he emphasized his faith that all men, someday, would be brothers.

The rising tide of civil rights agitation produced, as King had hoped, a strong effect on national opinion

White House meeting of civil rights leaders in 1963

Civil Rights Act of 1964

Martin Luther King, Jr.

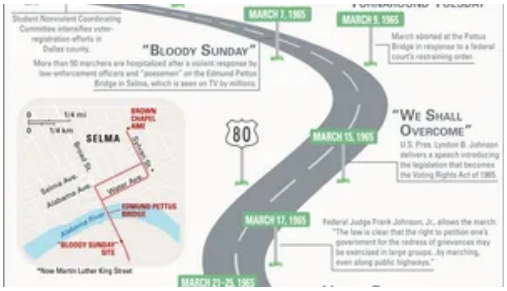
Martin Luther King, Jr., at Montgomery

Selma March

and resulted in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, authorizing the federal government to enforce desegregation of public accommodations and outlawing discrimination in publicly owned facilities, as well as in employment. That eventful year was climaxed by the award to King of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in December. “I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind,” said King in his acceptance speech. “I refuse to accept the idea that the ‘isness’ of man’s present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts him.”

Challenges of the final years

The first signs of opposition to King’s tactics from within the civil rights movement surfaced during the March 1965 demonstrations in Selma, Alabama, which were aimed at dramatizing the need for a federal voting-rights law that would provide legal support for the enfranchisement of African Americans in the South. King organized an initial march from Selma to the state capitol building in Montgomery but did not lead it himself. The marchers were turned back by state troopers with nightsticks and tear gas. He was determined to lead a second march, despite an injunction by a federal court and efforts from Washington to persuade him to cancel it. Heading a procession of 1,500 marchers, Black and white, he set out across Pettus Bridge outside Selma until the group came to a barricade of state troopers. But, instead of going on and forcing a confrontation, he led his followers to kneel in prayer and then unexpectedly turned back. This decision cost King the support of many



A brief history of the Selma March

young radicals who were already faulting him for being too cautious. The suspicion of an “arrangement” with federal and local authorities—vigorously but not entirely convincingly denied—clung to the Selma affair. The country was nevertheless aroused, resulting in the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Throughout the nation, impatience with the lack of greater substantive progress encouraged the growth of Black militancy. Especially in the slums of the large Northern cities, King’s religious philosophy of nonviolence was increasingly questioned. The rioting in the Watts district of Los Angeles in August 1965 demonstrated the depth of unrest among urban African Americans. In an effort to meet the challenge of the ghetto, King and his forces initiated a drive against racial discrimination in Chicago at the beginning of the following year. The chief target was to be segregation in housing. After a spring and summer of rallies, marches, and demonstrations, an agreement was signed between the city and a coalition of African Americans, liberals, and labour organizations, calling for various measures to enforce the existing laws and regulations with respect to housing. But this agreement was to have little effect; the impression remained that King’s Chicago campaign was nullified partly because of the opposition of that city’s powerful mayor, Richard J. Daley, and partly because of the unexpected complexities of Northern racism.

Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X

In Illinois and Mississippi alike, King was now being challenged and even publicly derided by young Black-power enthusiasts. Whereas King stood for patience, middle-class respectability, and a measured approach to social change, the sharp-tongued, blue jean-clad young urban radicals stood for confrontation and immediate change. In the latter’s eyes, the suit-wearing, calm-spoken civil rights leader was irresponsibly passive and old beyond his years (King was in his 30s)—more a member of the other side of the generation gap than their revolutionary leader. Malcolm X went so far as to call King’s tactics “criminal”: “Concerning nonviolence, it is criminal to teach a man not to defend himself when he is the constant victim of brutal attacks.”

In the face of mounting criticism, King broadened his approach to include concerns other than racism. On April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City and again on the 15th at a mammoth peace rally in that city, he committed himself irrevocably to opposing U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Once before, in early January 1966, he had condemned the war, but official outrage from Washington and strenuous opposition within the Black community itself had caused him to relent. He next sought to widen his base by forming a coalition of the poor of all races that would address itself to economic problems such as poverty and unemployment. It was a version of populism—seeking to enroll janitors, hospital workers, seasonal labourers, and the destitute of Appalachia, along with the student militants and pacifist intellectuals. His endeavours along these lines, however, did not engender much support in any segment of the population.

Meanwhile, the strain and changing dynamics of the civil rights movement had taken a toll on King, especially in the final months of his life. “I’m frankly tired of marching. I’m tired of going to jail,” he admitted in 1968. “Living every day under the threat of death, I feel discouraged every now and then and feel my work’s in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.”

funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.

aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

King’s plans for a Poor People’s March to Washington were interrupted in the spring of 1968 by a trip to Memphis, Tennessee, in support of a strike by that city’s sanitation workers. In the opinion of many of his followers and biographers, King seemed to sense his end was near. As King prophetically told a crowd at the Mason Temple Church in Memphis on April 3, the night before he died, “I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.” The next day, while standing on the second-story balcony of the Lorraine Motel, where he and his associates were staying, King was killed by a sniper’s bullet. The killing sparked riots and disturbances in over 100 cities across the country. On March 10, 1969, the accused assassin, a white man, James Earl Ray, pleaded guilty to the murder and was sentenced to 99 years in prison.

Ray later recanted his confession, claiming lawyers had coerced him into confessing and that he was the victim of a conspiracy. In a surprising turn of events, members of the King family eventually came to Ray's defense. King's son Dexter met with the reputed assassin in March 1997 and then publicly joined Ray's plea for a reopening of his case. When Ray died on April 23, 1998, Coretta Scott King declared, "America will never have the benefit of Mr. Ray's trial, which would have produced new revelations about the assassination…as well as establish the facts concerning Mr. Ray's innocence." Although the U.S. government conducted several investigations into the murder of King and each time concluded that Ray was the sole assassin, the killing remains a matter of controversy.

David L. Lewis

Historical significance and legacy

In the years after his death, King remained the most widely known African American leader of his era. His stature as a major historical figure was confirmed by the successful campaign to establish a national holiday in his honour in the United States and by the building of a King memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C., near the Lincoln Memorial, the site of his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963. Many states and municipalities have enacted King holidays, authorized public statues and paintings of him, and named streets, schools, and other entities for him. These efforts to honour King have focused more on his role as a civil rights advocate than on his controversial speeches, during his final year, condemning American intervention in Vietnam and calling for the Poor People's Campaign.

The King holiday campaign overcame forceful opposition, with critics citing FBI surveillance files suggesting that King was an adulterous radical influenced by communists. Although the release of these files during the 1970s under the Freedom of Information Act fueled the public debate over King's legacy, the extensive archives that now exist document King's life and thought and have informed numerous serious studies offering balanced and comprehensive perspectives. Two major books featuring King—David J. Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* (1986) and Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters* (1988)—won Pulitzer Prizes. Subsequent books and articles reaffirmed King's historical significance while portraying him as a complex figure: flawed, fallible, and limited in his control over the mass movements with which he was associated, yet also a visionary leader who was deeply committed to achieving social justice through nonviolent means.

Although the idea of a King national holiday did not gain significant congressional support until the late 1970s, efforts to commemorate King's life began almost immediately after his assassination. In 1968 Rep. John Conyers of Michigan introduced a King holiday bill. The idea gradually began to attract political support once the newly formed Congressional Black Caucus included the holiday in its reform agenda. Coretta Scott King also played a central role in building popular support for the King holiday campaign while serving as founding president of the Atlanta-based Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change (later renamed the King Center), which became one of the major archives of King's papers.

Despite the overall conservative trend in American politics in the 1980s, which might have been expected to work against recognition of the efforts of a controversial activist, King holiday advocates gained political support by portraying him as a symbol of the country's progress in race relations. Musician Stevie Wonder contributed to the campaign by writing and recording "Happy Birthday," a popular tribute to King. In 1983 Coretta Scott King and Stevie Wonder participated in the 20th Anniversary March on Washington, which drew a bigger crowd than the original march.

After the House and the Senate voted overwhelmingly in favour of the King holiday bill sponsored by Sen. Ted Kennedy, Pres. Ronald Reagan put aside his initial doubts and signed the legislation on November 3, 1983, establishing Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, to be celebrated annually on the third Monday in January. Coretta Scott King also succeeded in gaining congressional approval to establish a King Federal Holiday Commission to plan annual celebrations, beginning January 20, 1986, that would encourage "Americans to reflect on the principles of racial equality and nonviolent social change espoused by Dr. King."

Celebration of the King national holiday did not end contention over King's legacy, but his status as an American icon became more widely accepted over time. The revelation during the early 1990s that King had plagiarized some of his academic writings and the occasional controversies involving his heirs did little to undermine recognition of King's enduring impact on the country. Even before the first King national holiday, members of King's fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha, had proposed a permanent memorial in Washington, D.C. By the end of the 20th century, that proposal had secured governmental approval for the site on the Tidal Basin, near the Mall. In 2000 an international design competition ended with the selection of a proposal by ROMA Design Group. To build and maintain the memorial, the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation eventually raised more than $100 million.

Commemorations of King’s life were also held in other countries, and in 2009 a congressional delegation traveled to India to mark the 50th anniversary of King’s pilgrimage to what he called the “Land of Gandhi.”

Legacy

As with the lives of other major historical figures, King’s life has been interpreted in new ways by successive generations of scholars, many of whom have drawn attention to the crucial role of local Black leaders in the African American protest movements of the 1950s and ’60s. Recognizing that grassroots activists such as Rosa Parks, Fred Shuttlesworth, and others prepared the way for King’s rise to national prominence, biographers and historians have questioned the view that Southern Black protest movements relied on King’s charismatic guidance. Nonetheless, studies of King continue to acknowledge his distinctive leadership role. For example, though he often downplayed his contribution to the Montgomery bus boycott, King’s inspirational leadership and his speeches helped to transform a local protest over bus seating into a historically important event. More generally, studies of King have suggested that his most significant contribution to the modern African American freedom struggle was to link Black aspirations to transcendent, widely shared democratic and Christian ideals. While helping grassroots leaders mobilize African Americans for sustained mass struggles, he inspired participants to believe that their cause was just and consistent with traditional American egalitarian values. King also appealed to the consciences of all Americans, thus building popular support for civil rights reform. His strategy of emphasizing nonviolent protest and interracial cooperation enabled him to fight effectively against the Southern system of legalized racial segregation and discrimination, but it also proved inadequate during his final years as he sought to overcome racial and economic problems that were national in scope.

Clayborne Carson

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